

An investigation of why I came to England and how I and through me my family were saved from the Jewish Holocaust.

I was born, inconveniently, a couple of weeks after the year 1910 had begun, so that, in my mother's ambitious eyes, I was about to 'lose a year' and to begin my school career when I was practically seven. When I was ten, however, the neighbourhood grammar school had fortunately had so many applications for entry that it was obliged to create a parallel first form. It therefore advertised belatedly a few more vacancies. This, and the fact that I had been a good little girl in the fourth of Juniors, enabled me to skip the not optional fifth. Consequently, I just managed at thirteen to start learning English under the wonderful, inspiring and sympathetic Dr. Packeni.

Five times a week, when I came home from school, I would rush into the kitchen, where I imparted my newly-acquired knowledge to our patient cook. Thus the teaching of English as the ideal task in life was for me linked forever with the overall idea of teaching. Anyway, this had become entrenched in my impressionable mind at the age of ten, when I read a novel for juveniles - in three volumes! - about a boy called Asmus Semper (I have forgotten the author's name) who became an enthusiastic teacher.

When I passed out from Grammar School, I applied for a place at the Institute of Education (to teach juniors) and was rejected. At that time, Vienna was 'The Red Vienna' i.e. Social Democrat, whereas the rest of Austria was 'Christlichsozial' - mind you, 'sozial' and not 'sozialistisch' or 'socialdemokratisch; and like everything else in Austria, 'christlich' included as an essential component, 'anti-semitisch'. I was Jewish and, at the age of eighteen, completely unpolitical, certainly not 'christlichsozial'. The reason for my rejection was easy to see. On simply every kind of application form was the question, 'Religion?'

The university was open to anybody who had passed the final examination of Grammar School (Matura), and I now decided to study German and English (Germanistik) with concurrent courses in Paedagogics and Method of teaching foreign languages at Grammar Schools. This took me five years including the doctoral thesis. I loved my studies, but my whole time was under the cloud of politics. National Socialism was gaining foothold and rapidly growing, especially among students. Frequently loutish hordes of these stormed into lecture rooms with shouts of 'Jews out!', beating and chasing them. I remember one particular occasion when a packed crowd of students were filling the wide set of 'die Rampe' - the steps from the entrance gates down to the road - in heated but civilised political discussion. I was just thinking, 'thank God, reason not violence,' when a group of rowdies forced their way through us with knuckle-dusters and nail-studded lashes (nageikas), shouting 'Jewish pigs, whatever they say!' Their bruised and bleeding victims fled down the Rampe. The police, by ancient law forbidden to enter the

autonomous university, received them at the bottom of the steps and arrested them. They were in full sympathy with the Nazi students. I saw it with my own eyes. I was there. We were so politicized that we chose our lecturers accordingly. At my final oral exam, the lecturer with the greatest scholarly reputation asked me why I did not write my thesis under him, suggesting that he was not greatly impressed by his colleague! I could not answer, 'Because you are reputed to be rather nationalistic, Professor!' (meaning anti-semitic). I was both frightened and disgusted by university life, and in the end performed most study and research in the National Library, attending the university building in the main only for examinations.

My studies were followed by one year's training at the only 'Gymnasium' under a Jewish head.

On Parents' Days I made the acquaintance of a mother who asked me if I might take her daughter on a mountain holiday with me and speak English with her. Gritli was a dear, and not at all unintelligent, only a bit doughy, slow and not fond of either study or physical exertion. She is still my friend. She is married and has two scholarly children. I took her to the valley of the Oetz, a tributary of the River Inn in the Tyrol. We stayed in the highest village in Austria, 1900m. high, among the highest peaks, all of them over 3000m above sea level. We had a great time, at the end of which she could wonder in perfect English what the weather would be like the next day, as well as where her toothbrush might be.

For me, the bearing of that holiday on my future was profound: I loved the place where we stayed, the incomparable Upper Gurgl. I went there again the next year. Like most holidays in Austria, these, too, consisted of hill-walking and swimming in lakes. This time, however, I conceived a passion for the overtowering mountains, the awe-inspiring peaks where rocks grew out of exuberant meadows and were topped by the splendour of glaciers. In bleak weather, grim and wild-looking, near and threatening; but transparently delicate, weightless, as if made of the thinnest pale-blue glass when the sun poured its light over them. I ached to be walking up there in the purity of sheer beauty. But alas, I needed a guide, and that I could not afford. I asked the houseboy of the little Gasthof (his name I do remember: Serafin Fender), to look around for someone to share with me; and lo and behold, one day he knocked at my door with, 'There's a young Englishman wants to go on tour with you.' This young Englishman's name was Jimmy. He lent me his flannels as I only had light summer dresses with me. I transformed them into knickerbockers, and next morning, before five, we were trudging uphill behind the long-legged, large-booted Alois Fender. Three days later, Jimmy was back in England and I in Vienna. Without this happy intersection of our lives everything would have taken a different course; but to trace what it was that took him to that place at that time, I would need to make another such investigation.

It was 1936, and life is not all holidays. Since I was fully qualified, I had been applying for any vaguely suitable

opening. It proved impossible to find a job. There were several reasons: Vienna, erstwhile capital of a huge empire was now, after its truncation in 1918, producing almost the same number of academics as before. Secondly, Grammar Schools, unlike primary ones, were not run by the 'Reds' but by the increasingly discriminative 'Land'. Moreover I had become politicized; a socialist and active member of the Social Democrats. Even as detached a man as my father said I was right. In Austria a decent person could not but be a socialist.

And then I committed an act of atrocious stupidity. We Grammar School candidates, all of us in possession of the Doctorate and teaching qualifications, had to attend regularly at the Board of Education to beg the Civil Servant in charge of selection for a post. Once when I was performing this degrading task, I was received with the words, 'But what do I see, Frau Doktor, your front is completely bare and unadorned,' - pointing to my lapel. Oh dear! I had left the badge of the ruling party in my dressing gown! I apologised. 'I am so sorry, I left it in another garment,' and I added with repressed rage and contempt because the fellow was a well-known turncoat, having defected from the Social Democrats in good time and to good effect, 'But you, Professor, will not have me suffer for this omission!' Now this was the last straw. He would never forgive me.

The other episode is of a more private nature. I had promised a very dear colleague and friend to inform her immediately of any suitable vacancy published in the official gazette to which my father subscribed. It so happened that the Head of the only Jewish Grammar School in Austria told my father, whom he knew well, that a vacancy would shortly come up, and advised him to encourage me to apply at once, which I did. The character of this information was private but I notified my friend of the vacancy, as promised, on publication in the gazette, although it was for English and German and not for French and German, her qualification. Nevertheless she felt betrayed and broke with me. In the end neither of us was appointed.

The only teaching experience I could get was in private lessons, which I found uninteresting, and in evening schools, which alone of all schools were privately run and for profit, and catered for pupils thrown out from the state schools on account of intractable behaviour and incompetence. The pay was scandalous: I seem to remember 2 Austrian shillings per lesson, and these were then 60 shillings to one pound! One of those director-owners still owes me for 50 lessons!

On top of being so thwarted in my truly desired profession, I was frustrated in love and also, still, at the age of 27, living at home dependent on my parents, who were then in straitened circumstances.

Is it surprising that I felt painfully disaffected from the country of my happy childhood and the beloved mountains? Or that my thoughts turned to the land where the word 'man' was preceded by 'gentle', and where the one word 'fair' combined the meanings of 'just' and 'beautiful'?

One fine day I talked it over with my parents: 'The holidays

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are coming. I will never achieve a job here. I am wasting my time. I will go to England where I will at least improve my English instead of forgetting it. And if I find a foothold I will stay. Mummy will have my papers and enter them for any, even the most unlikely, opening, and should anybody be willing to give me an interview, you can 'phone me and I can be here within ten hours. On no account am I going to accept money from you. I have saved enough for the journey and to start with. If I can't manage, I'll come back home.'

My train to the west skirted Lake Constance and crossed the border between Austria, still independent then, and Germany, already under Hitler. One of the two Germans in my compartment told me he had moved from Austrian Bregenz into German Konstanz because now he didn't have to be afraid of meeting a Jew whenever he walked across the market square. I commiserated. 'Poor thing,' I said, 'it's happened to you now.' Whereupon the other one took me to the dining car. (I was a pretty girl, then.) 'Serves him right,' he murmured. An Englishman in the corner seemed to chuckle behind his paper. 'I'll be rid of you now, you bastards!' was what I thought. And I was, and I am.

Once in England, I wrote of course to Jimmy. 'I'm here. Shall we meet?' The only communication between us since the Tyrol had been the "flannels" which I had sent after him, and his acknowledgement. Occasionally he took me to the countryside; otherwise I lived in great poverty, giving a few private German lessons illegally. I could not obtain a work-permit because I had told the immigration officer only that I had come to improve my language. Else I would not have been allowed in. For a time I stayed in a girls' hostel in Bloomsbury and had a good breakfast, but later I was in poky rooms living on soft roes and baked beans. I became so run down that merely to lift an arm seemed too much effort. A doctor recommended green vegetables and a holiday in the country.

'How can I?' I said to Jimmy. I was invited then for a week, by his parents. What a surprise! The house was not a house but a mansion in the Kentish countryside, in grounds large enough to take walks in. Jimmy's father turned out to be a very wealthy solicitor with a practice in Green Park, a magistrate and a Lloyds Underwriter. After that I spent many lovely weekends there. He gave me an allowance of £2 a week. He enquired from the Home Office what I might do to obtain a work permit, and then sent me to a nine-months' course for secretarial work in English, French and German, on which I was issued a permit after such work was found for me - since it would not have been easily possible to find an English person qualified for it. It was the hardest work ever for me to learn and I did do it to professional standard. I have almost forgotten all of it, but it did serve its purpose. By the way, I paid all back with self-earned money much later: I insisted on it. I will never be able to pay back the goodness, the magnanimity, the understanding kindness; nor would I want to.

Even before this happy solution I had another stroke of luck. In the early summer of '38, I think, I had decided to give up my miserable room and take time off with the Holiday

Fellowship. Every Agency, school and translation office that I approached for work was closed. It was 'sour gherkin time', as the hot summer months used to be called because schools offices and businesses closed and gherkins were used in sandwiches. And the fortnight at Alston in Cumberland would not cost more than the room and the expensive fares in London. There I met a couple who were students in country-dancing at Morley College, the biggest Working-mens' College in the country. Its head was Mrs. Hubback, a quite wonderful woman who, together with Eleanor Rathbone, had instituted Family Allowances. The country-dancers advised me to apply to that lady, who unfortunately was already staffed for the autumn. But that refusal was quickly followed by another letter asking me to come for an interview because, unexpectedly, as once before in my life, an overflow class had to be organised. And that wonderful woman did not mind applying for the necessary permit. She engaged me on the spot. I hugely enjoyed teaching there, and I was paid a lecturer's fee for the weekly 2-hours' teaching. Her testimonial later opened doors to all schools that I ever applied to.

When Austria was annexed by Hitler, in March '38, my mother 'phoned to tell me not to come home; and as the news (still much understated) came to England, of the Nazis' treatment of the Jews, Jimmy's father sent him to Vienna to see if my people could be left there. On no account could they remain there. My father was so terrified that he would not get out of bed. Mr. W. did the only thing that could save my people from deportation to Auschwitz: he wrote to the Home Office guaranteeing their maintenance. They arrived before Christmas '38. For my sister, who was a Doctor of Law, I had managed to find domestic work, the condition necessary for people under 50 to be admitted here. He had them collected from the Channel port in his poshest car, by his chauffeur!

Note

This was sent to my father by Katie Fielding in 1997 after she had sent him a tape of an interview based on it but I do not know when it was written. Some of the facts when my family is concerned are not quite accurate according to my own research as recorded in my account 'Ainsworth and Marianne Waters 1935-39'. For example there was correspondence before her arrival in England and she was invited to Rowhill a few days after her arrival.

Brian a Waters
(Jimmy's son)

27/10/2019

THE CODA

Had I not been allowed to skip 5th year Juniors, I would not have been taught by Dr. Packeni.

I would not have loved English so.

Had I not read Asmus Semper and liked my teachers so, I would not have wanted to teach Juniors, then I would not have been rejected by the Paedagogisches Institut, and would not have studied German and English to be a Grammar School teacher.

Had I not been encouraged by my parents to follow against all odds my own inclinations in the choice of career,

then I would not have done my practical at the school where I met Gritli's mother,

then I would not have got to the valley of the Oetz,

then I would not have met Jimmy,

and had I not been so frustrated both in Austria and in London in my search for a job, I would not have left Austria, and not met Jimmy's father, either.

Had I not been born Jewish, I would not be I: I would not have needed to 'survive'.

Because I did come to England and survive and met Gritli's mother and Seraphin Fender, and Jimmy and Jimmy's father, and come to live in England, my sister and my parents and I were saved from a fate that I dare not name.

If I had not come to London, as did all new arrivals, I would not have met my husband, would not have come to Nottingham and would not now be here with you.

And none of this would have happened if I were not Jewish, but then, again, I would not have been I.

And wouldn't that have been a pity!

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